



Ethiopia - Election 2010 and the players

Say good bye to the Walwas and check out the new guys in town

By Hindessa Abdul

Election 2010 has already claimed its first victim in the Tigray State. Mr Aregawi Gebre Yohannes who is the candidate of Arena Tigray (one of the members of Medrek) for the House of Peoples Representative (HPR) has been stabbed to death in his own small bar. "He was killed in a personal row outside his constituency," was the government's spokesperson answer.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has not said anything so far it is busy counting the registered voters which it says are around 30 million. But few take NEBE seriously. The Indian Ocean Newsletter says the actual figure is a closely guarded secret. Election observers have been cautious to get involved. The Carter Center has already declined to participate. The European Union is still assessing its options as if what is going on right now is not part of an election process. The obvious reluctance is an indication what even the major donors think of the exercise.

The players

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) second man and government Communication Affairs Office chief with a minister portfolio Bereket Simon is not contesting for a seat in parliament.

There have been credible reports about the health problem of Mr Bereket. Now his bosses have decided to leave him out. The rumor that he was poised to contest in his birthplace Gondar has finally been put to rest. Bereket still may hold his ministerial portfolio but not as a member of parliament.

Another person who has long been rumored to be set aside is Tefera Walwa. The minister of Capacity Building, who has been out of the public view for a long time, seems to have fallen out with the guys at Arat Kilo. His one's gigantic ministry was supervising top offices like Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Commission and a number of others. He was also presiding over the school net project, the status of which is known only to him. Not only will the Ministry of Capacity Building loose the supervision of those ministries but itself is going to be turned into a department within the prime minister's office.

Tefera has been silent for long. When security forces came to arrest Tefera's octogenarian father-in-law on coup attempt charge, his wife was there trying to defend her dad. So she was taken into custody along with her father. The once favorite son of Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) has never recuperated from those wounds. But to his credit unlike many of his comrades, Tefera has not been implicated in business and recently he advocated for property registration and financial disclosure of all government officials.

Tefera has contested for parliamentary seat in Addis Ababa three times. He lost them all. Though he has been a mayor of the city in the early 90s he has hardly left a mark. He has also served as minister of defense in a crucial moment when the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out. It is a mystery till this day what he has actually been doing at the time. Many do not even remember he has ever held that position.

Enter EDP

There is also talk of a deal between EPRDF and Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) of Lidetu Ayalew. The number and the constituencies where they field candidates look a carefully orchestrated move. Ironically their campaign symbols are complementary. EPRDF is a bee while EDP chose to be the flower. Coincidence? Anybody's guess. Lidetu will be contesting in the Bugna Woreda of North Wollo where his chances of winning a seat are far better than in Addis. He seems to have understood how the city residents think of him, not to mention his other name Kihdetu given to him by his onetime supporters. So the only place he can secure a seat in the House is to go to faraway places out of observers' eyes where he can easily manipulate results with a little help from friends in high places. But Lidetu downplays such assertions. In a recent interview he said his home town people have been yearning for their favorite son to be their voice in the HPR. Lidetu is also busy promoting his new book where he is discussing his political views. The book is said to dwell on attacking all the opposition parties and praising the incumbent for bringing democracy to the country. Some who had read the book say generalization and sweeping statements are the building blocks of the author's premises.

While former CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy) leadership member Engineer Gizachew Shiferaw of Medrek will face off the least known EPRDF candidate Dr Zerihun Kebede, State Minister of Science and Technology, in Woreda 17, EDP's Sophia Yilma is playing the spoiler role by trying to take some vote from the Engineer. Before joining the leadership of EDP, Sophia was a journalist during the Dergue leadership. She is also the daughter of Yilma Deressa the well known finance minister during Emperor's Haileselassie administration.

Same scenario is playing out in Woreda 18 where former president Dr Negasso Gidada faces off Mines and Energy minister Alemayehu Tegenu, where the potential spoiler is Mr Mushe Semu the secretary of EDP. Though the chance of Mushe winning the constituency is slim, he may take some votes from Dr Negasso that might favor the EPRDF candidate. Mr Alemayehu got some publicity in relation to the Gilgel Gibe hydro electric project. The nation's sole power provider the Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCo) is under his ministry.

Of codes and engineers

Engineer Hailu Shawel who has become unpredictable in recent months is one of the contestants. The 72 year old was part of an election code that has been signed by EPRDF, EDP and his own All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP). He has been hailed by the powers in Addis for taking the initiative in signing the code and to that effect the government threw two parties in appreciation, one of which in the National Palace. But in a bizarre twist of events, the Engineer has been denouncing the code and even threatened to boycott the elections. He has refused to participate in the debate of political parties.

Engineer Hailu, however, will face off the former Addis Ababa University (AAU) lecturer Dr Hailu Araya of Medrek in Woreda 23. Five years earlier the Engineer won the

constituency by a landslide against an EPRDF candidate. This time around EPRDF is sending the political science graduate of AAU, Ms Aster Mammo. Aster has been speaker of the Oromia parliament and minister of Youth and Sports. Aster is normally shy and pleasant. Her youth, gender, confidence, and the normally calm attitude which is highly regarded in the Ethiopian society could have won her the constituency. But there are lessons to be learned from the fate of former Addis Ababa mayor Arkebe Ekubai who was popular by residents but the party he represented cost him the seat.

New kids on the block

Among the candidates of EPRDF, some who have so far played a passive role have been fielded to the Addis Ababa constituency. One among them is Mr Abdurahim Ahmed, the spokesperson of the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation. Mr Abdurahim has for three years consistently and flatly denied the government's suspension of text messaging in the country following the 2005 elections. He was insisting that was a technical glitch. While he is largely unknown to the ordinary voter, his calmness and reserved character is what he has to sell. Otherwise he is completely devoid of any charisma.

Though his status at the moment is not known, the director general of the Ethiopian Revenue and Customs Authority Mr Melaku Fenta is also among the ones EPRDF wants to put forward. The former minister of Inland Revenue has been silently beaten in Addis Ababa five years earlier. Right now he is riding on a success of the newly structured Customs Authority. He is expected to be among the new blood the incumbent want to capitalize on.

Mr Shimeles Kemal is the one reaping most from the seeds of his political adventures. On top of his state minister post that was awarded to him following his prosecution of the CUD members, now his party is confident enough to field him as a candidate in Addis Ababa. Even with his first term job as State Minister, he is by far the most visible cabinet members of the government. He managed to write three laws in as much years all of which aimed at curbing human rights of citizens: anti terrorism proclamation, the civil society law and the media law. That devotion earned him so much credibility that at the moment he is the de facto spokesperson of EPRDF eclipsing Bereket Simon.

A graduate of law at the Addis Ababa University, Shimeles also writes articles bullying different news papers and individuals under various pen names. Right now he is busy attacking the owner of Reporter Mr Amare Aregawi. Before joining the government he used to contribute articles to this same paper.

To wrap it up

This election is not about taking over government. The incumbent is already assessing who to reshuffle and replace after the elections. A number of ambassadors have already been called from their overseas posts to base. The election is rather a fight for some opposition politicians just to secure some seats in the rubber stamp parliament. Some want to make their voice heard against all odds. Some might be lured by the ETB 4000 salary and the perks. As the days to polling day approaches expect to see some drama in Tigray where the over confident Seye Abraha made a controversial statement about his chances of winning elections. Otherwise it is business as usual at the Menelik Palace